February 2025

Understanding Design Basics

Overview

To create effective content, it is important to understand how to compose and structure. Effective content not only captures attention but also communicates the intended message clearly and persuasively.

Ultimately, most of the process comes down to the design elements and principles, as well as compositional rules to create visually appealing posts.

By understanding these foundational aspects, you can develop posts that resonate with the audience, reinforce brand identity, and clearly deliver your message.

Users on digital platforms only have a very short attention span, so it is crucial to utilise every weapon in your design arsenal to capture their attention.

Take this document, for example, where each element has its purpose and place. Why should the footer always end up at the bottom of the page, not the top? Why should the heading of this paragraph be more prominent than the following text?

Some of these principles can come down to common knowledge; our eyes will naturally be drawn to the larger element. On the contrary, some principles are not intuitive and are only processed as a background program inside our heads.

I fully recognise that the designs I have made are imperfect and could always be improved. The truth is, creating a flawless design is nearly impossible. After all, "to err is human," and mistakes are part of the creative process. However, while perfection may be unattainable, creating a clear and coherent design is what you should aim for.
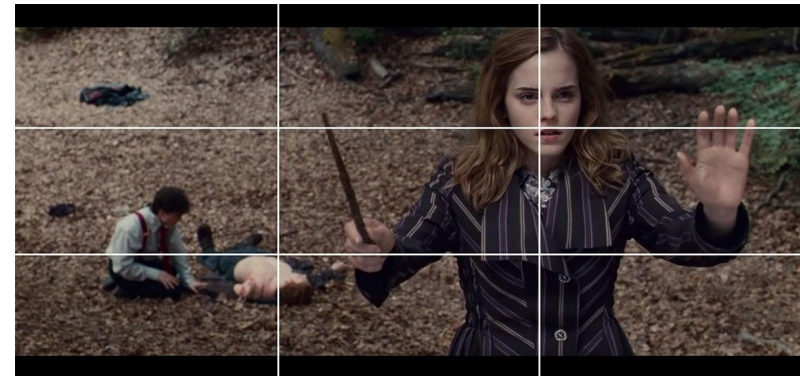
Compositional Rules

These rules are ways to arrange elements in a design to create a pleasing and balanced composition. Although not all of the rules are explained, these are the most stark.

Rule of Thirds

Although this is categorised as a compositional rule, it is more of a guideline.

Imagine dividing a photo or your camera's viewfinder into nine equal zones using horizontal and vertical lines. In that case, that forms your rule-of-thirds grid — a setting you can select on most cameras and even your phone.

The rule of thirds is a composition guideline that places your subject in the left or right third of an image, leaving the other two-thirds more open.

The rule of thirds is a powerful technique for creating visually engaging and well-balanced compositions in photography and design. It involves dividing an image into nine equal parts using horizontal and vertical lines. You can achieve a more dynamic and appealing layout by positioning key elements along these lines or at their intersections.

The goal is to avoid placing your subject directly in the center of the frame, as this can make the design feel static. Instead, positioning the subject at one of the four intersection points creates a sense of movement and balance.

Social media posts or graphic designs, this can be applied to titles, objects, or key visuals. While there are times when breaking this rule can be effective, following the rule of thirds generally results in a more professional and visually pleasing composition.

Rule of Thirds
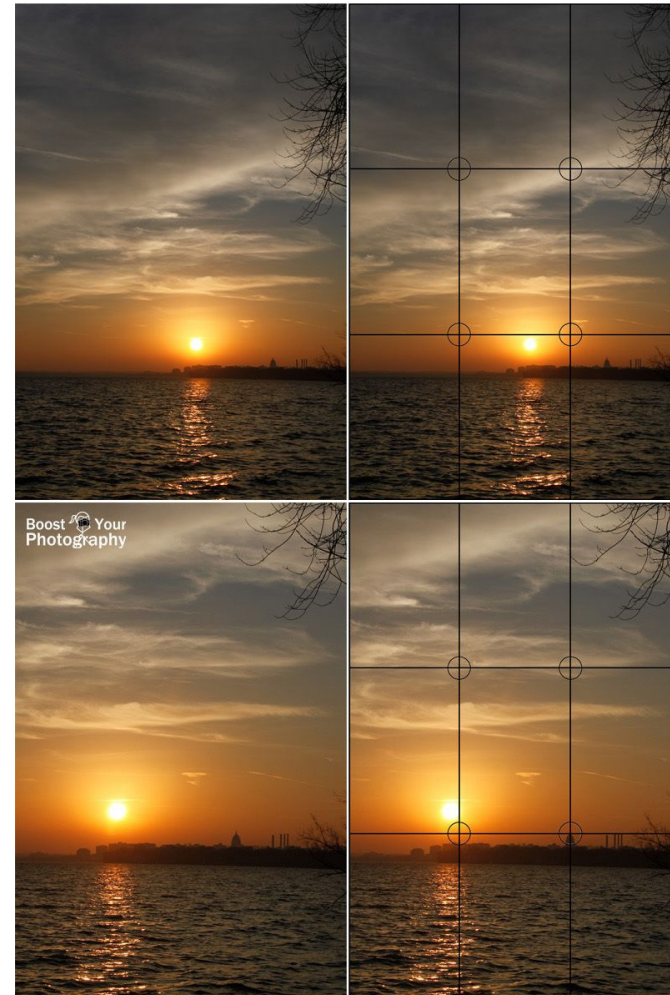
Reading Gravity

The Gutenberg Rule is used to show a user behaviour known as reading gravity, the Western habit of reading left-to-right, top-to-bottom. This document focuses on the Western habit, but remember that this differs in other cultures, such as right-to-left in the Middle East and bottom-to-top in some Asian cultures.

The main location the eyes start on a design is the top-left quadrant (Primary Optical Area); they then progress to the top-right, cross down to the bottom-left corner, and then terminate at the bottom-right. It's easiest to imagine the reading gravity line as a "Z", where the line represents the general path the eyes follow.

Primary Optical Area

Strong Fallow Area

Reading Gravity

Weak Fallow Area

Terminal Area
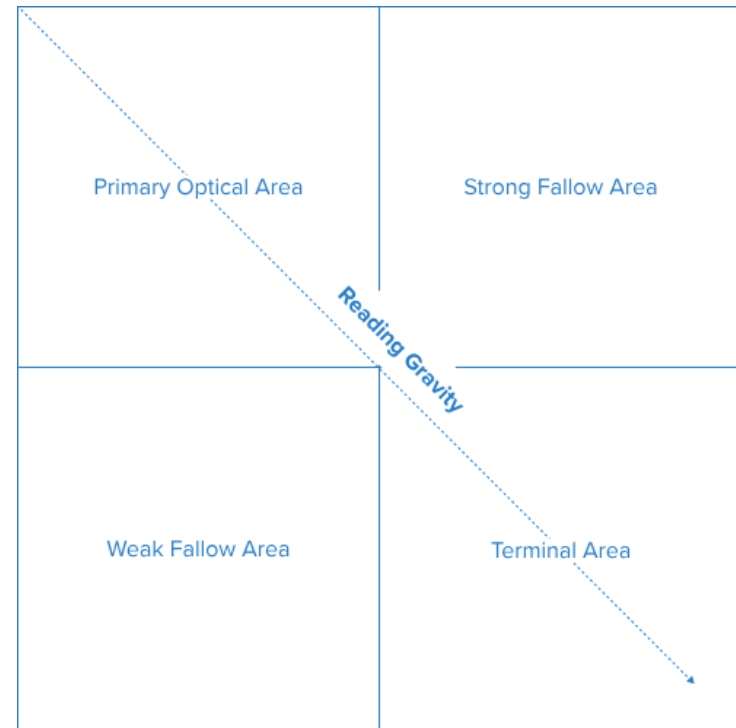
Design

The design of a work can be split into two categories: the elements and the principles. These are concepts that can be applied to all forms of visualisation. Although this document does not explain the above in great detail, you can refer to this source to learn more about them. As tedious as it sounds, I highly recommend you familiarise yourself with the elements and principles.

An easy way to understand the difference between the two is to imagine elements as the building materials of a house—like wood, bricks, ceramic, and plastic—while principles determine the house's overall style and appearance, such as whether it looks rustic, brutalist or modern. In the same way, the different combinations of musical notes create different genres, and different elements create different principles.
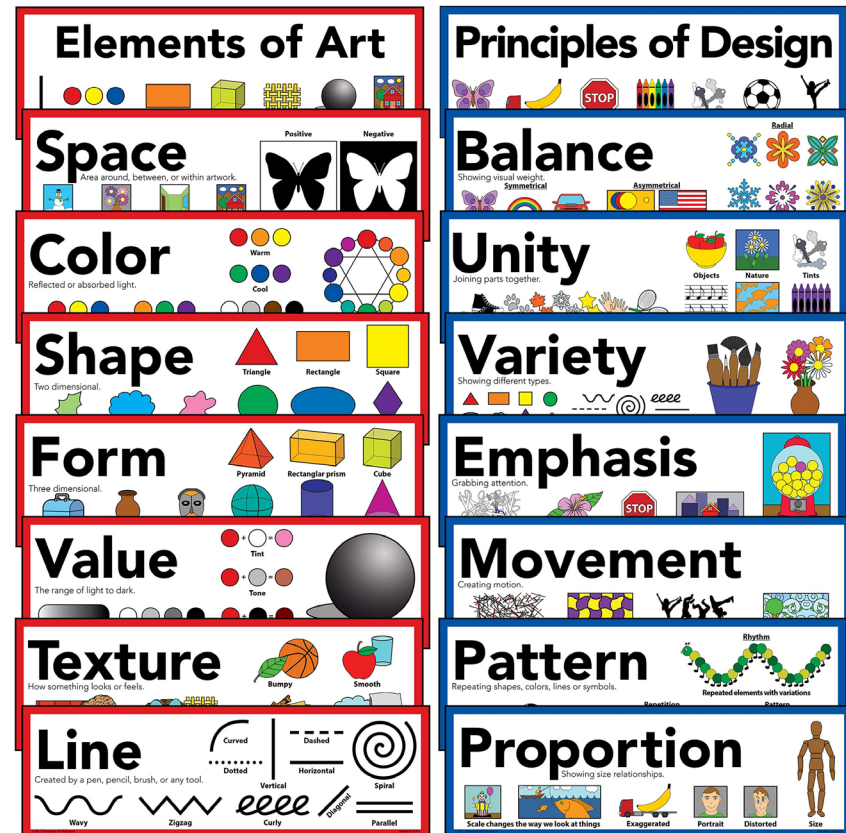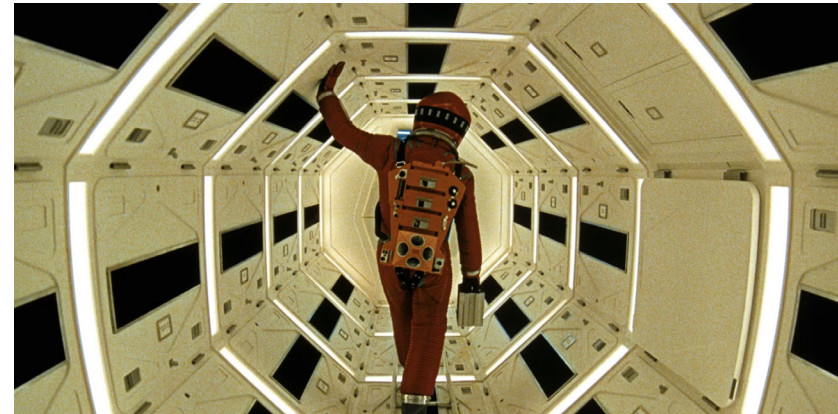
Design Elements

Design elements are the building blocks a visual artist or graphic designer uses to make a successful composition. Line, shape, colour and scale are some frequent examples; you need to go into a little more depth (e.g., a 2D geomentric square, a wavy solid line, burnt sienna).

It's important to consider what these elements mean and their purpose on the canvas? Purple colours often symbolise royalty, yellow represents happiness, red with anger. Curved lines can prompt feelings of creativity, whilst sharp lines can elicit trust and power. The list goes on and on and on. To further build on this symbolism, some elements can work together to create a principle.

Design Principles

Dark text appears strongly on lighter backgrounds, not because of the individual elements. Still, how the two interact is the basis of design principles, they collectively give elements purpose.

Just like how elements are the building blocks of a house, principles are what tie it together – the cherry on top. Headers and paragraphs are prime examples, what makes headers stand out more than the paragraph text? It's the size and weight of the font. It wouldn't draw much attention on its own, but when placed next to a smaller and lighter text, its importance is uplifted.

Typography

Not to be confused with fonts, typography refers to text arrangement.

A typeface is a family of letters, numbers and symbols. A font is a certain child in that family. Think of the typeface as the dog species and fonts as different breeds. You can have a typeface (Nohemi) and different fonts within that family (Nohemi Light, Nohemi Bold, etc.).

Now, typography plays a critical role in a design. Different typefaces produce different emotions. They can be categorised into four main sections: Serif, Sans Serif, Decorative, Script. We will only focus on the first two.
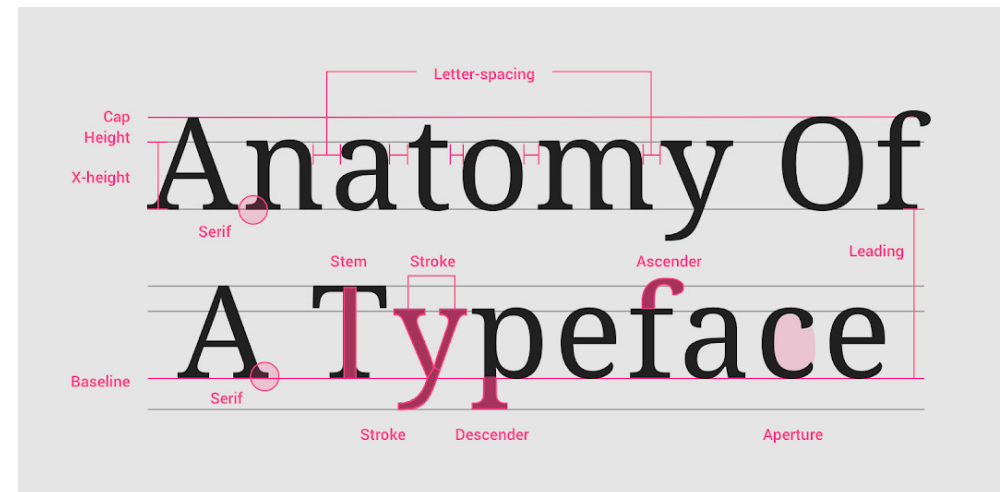
Sans versus Sans Serif

Serif refers to the ticks on the end of glyphs (letters). Sans means without, so sans serif simply means without serif. Now, although they look eerily similar, they serve two completely different purposes.

Serifs help with legibility at smaller scales and guide the eye, that's why most novels you'll pick up use them. They are also associated with authority and trust, which is why most luxury brands use them in their logo.

Sans serifs on the other hand are more contemporary and convery simplicity and minimalism. More creative brands tend to use them to convey comfort and modernism.

I strongly advise you look into these more in your own time, these examples only scratch the surface.

Padding

It's important to know your boundaries with design, literally. Pushing your elements to the edges of the canvas can limit readability, impair visual heirarchy and clutter the design. Although it doesn't seem like it can, cluttered designs stress the reader because they don't know what to focus on. Padding helps the design by giving some "breathing room" through white space at the edges of a container.

Depending on the amount of content you have on the page usually determines how much padding you use. If it gets too cluttered, you have one of two choices: cut the content or make a new page.

In this example, even though the background colours cover the entire image, you can see the invisible padding around the text.
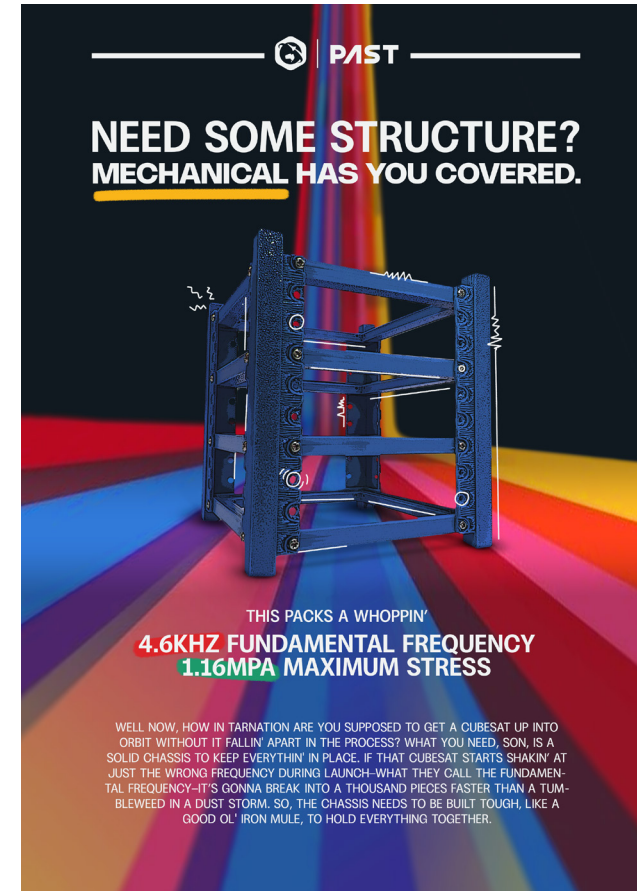
Example

Take the example on the right, it uses bold lines radiating outward, guiding the viewer's eye from the central figures to the text above, creating movement and energy. The dominant red and white color palette establishes strong contrast, symbolising themes of sacrifice and purity while enhancing the dramatic effect. Detailed linework adds texture, inviting closer inspection and adding complexity to the composition. The angular red cross shape anchors the design, providing structure and reinforcing the religious theme. Negative space contrasts with the dense text and illustrations, allowing the focal point to stand out clearly. The overall composition achieves asymmetrical balance through the thoughtful arrangement of elements, creating a harmonious yet dynamic visual flow.

Accessibility in Design

Accessibility details how effective a design is at including all audiences (not to be confused with inclusivity).

Colour contrast in text refers to how legible a text is on a background. This black text is legible across a white background, but a light-green text on a green background isn't. Where is the line between legible and illegible drawn? You can use [colour contrast checkers](#) to determine whether your text will be legible. You typically want good contrast for small text, and great contrast for large text.

Other considerations to take into account include whether your colours are colour-blind friendly or if you font is dyslexia friendly.

For websites, [WCAG](#) governs how websites should be built to be accessible for all peoples.

Inclusivity in Design

Inclusivity measures how well your design is at including all cultures e.g., people from different language backgrounds.

If an international user is shopping on your website, will they understand the different currency and language? How can you design a website effectively so that people with no digital knowledge can easily navigate it? These considerations are extremely important, especially in an all–inclusive environment like Curtin.

Ways to work around this include Google Translate, inferred infographics, larger icons, text–to–speech etc.

Inclusivity may seem tedious, but it is always important to consider everyone when designing something.

Interaction Design Foundation
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